Thirty years into teaching: Professional development, exhaustion and rejuvenation

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ABSTRACT: *Female primary school teachers are usually absent from debates about literacy theory and practice, teachers' professional development, significant policy changes and school reform. Typically they are positioned as the silent workers who passively translate the latest and of course best theory into practice, whatever that might be and despite what years of experience might tell them. Their accumulated knowledges and critical analysis, developed across careers, remain an untapped resource for the profession. In this paper five literacy educators, three primary school teachers and two university educators, all of whom have been teaching around thirty years, reflect on what constitutes professional development. The teachers examine their experiences of professional development in their particular school contexts – the problems with top-down, mandated professional development which has a managerial rather than educative function, the frustrations of trying to implement the experts' ideas without the resources, and the effects of devolved school management on teachers' work and learning. In contrast, they also explore their positive experiences of professional learning through being positioned as teacher researchers in a network of early and later career teachers engaged in a three-year research project investigating unequal literacy outcomes.*

KEY WORDS: *Professional development, teacher research, late career, teacher knowledge, literacy education, teachers' work, devolution, managerialism.*

INTRODUCTION

The five of us have been teaching language and literacy education in schools and universities for a combined total of over one hundred and fifty years – that is, around thirty years for each of us. What does all that teaching add up to and what does all that history suggest to us about the state of English literacy education right now? In this article we consider what constitutes *professional development* right now, what works

for teachers, what doesn't and the effects of different forms of professional development on teachers' and students' lives. This 150 years of accumulated teaching should, we argue count for something, yet as we will see, many teachers, including some of us, have lost confidence, optimism and energy. Some of us suffer from "professional amnesia" having forgotten or discarded much of what we "knew". Some of us fear our inadequacies in the face of what we don't understand – new literacies, new technologies, new children (traumatised, mentally ill, abused, isolated, lonely, violent).

We write as a collective, a group of women educators and researchers who came to know each other and work together through the project entitled *Teachers investigate unequal literacy outcomes: Cross-generational perspectives* (see also Kerkham & Hutchison, Boyer & Maney, this issue)[1]. The project brought early and late career teachers and university researchers together to investigate the problem of unequal literacy outcomes. We worked together to take another look at this intractable problem and to use our collective energies and experience to re-design pedagogies to re-connect children with the curriculum. We focussed particularly on children who had become alienated from, or disinterested in, school literacy practices (Comber & Kamler, 2004). The project began in 2002 with early career teachers (in the first five years of teaching, though most were in the first three years) inviting a more experienced colleague to join them in researching how unequal outcomes were manifest in their contexts. There were ten teacher-researchers in South Australia and ten in Victoria. We do not fully elaborate the design of the project here but summarise the key moves which are relevant to our discussion of professional development.

Importantly, right from the start, the teachers were positioned as researchers and the university researchers were positioned as co-researchers. The project began with teachers interviewing one other about their experiences and understandings of unequal literacy outcomes, what had made a difference to children's learning and what still remained problematic for them. The university researchers made available their own writing and thinking on literacy and inequality as well as research and theorising which had influenced them. We met regularly in research workshops to discuss our hunches and our questions. The university researchers assisted the teachers in designing a classroom literacy audit to examine the literacy curriculum they were making available, and how different children were positioned by that curriculum. The teachers identified children they were anxious about and conducted a case study of one child (using a range of methods including interview, home visits, classroom observations) in order to find out more about children's funds of knowledge (Moll, Amanti, Neff & Gonzalez, 1992) and what was inside their virtual schoolbags (Thomson, 2002). In other words, teachers tried to find out about their students' lives, pleasures and passions, knowledges and capabilities. Armed with this supplementary information and often with renewed respect for their students' potential, the teachers deliberately re-designed aspects of their literacy curriculum and pedagogy in order to try to re-connect the students who were most marginalised.

The project is on-going, but three fundamental principles are central to its operation:

1) a commitment to teachers taking up a researcher stance towards their classrooms;
2) negotiating reciprocal respectful cross-generational relationships;
3) working collectively to both pose problems and attempt to collectively address those which were within our sphere of influence

Professional development within the context of this project was about assembling research capacities and practices – interviews, observations, analysing transcripts, videotaping classroom events, reading and talking about related literature, talking about teaching, interrogating each other's assumptions and misunderstandings, interpreting data and coming to some shared conclusions. From the perspectives of Kamler and Comber who initiated the project, the intention was to design and carry out a project *with teachers,* rather than *on* or *about teachers.* Their contention remains that moving forward on education's major challenges cannot be done *for teachers*, *in spite of teachers* or *around teachers*. Real and sustainable educational reform must take into account teachers as embodied subjects with personal histories and dynamic professional identities. They were also convinced, after working with late career and recently retired women primary school teachers in an earlier project (Kamler & Comber, 2003), of the urgent need to historicize the work of the profession and to capture the career-long knowledge of a generation of teachers who will soon leave the profession.

This article grew out of conversations across the thirty months of the project to date – workshops, teleconferences, teachers' writing and teachers' audio-taped reflections. In this case, Barbara Kamler and Barbara Comber worked with three late career teachers in South Australia – Di Hood, Sue Moreau and Judy Painter – who have become increasingly passionate and articulate about the state of professional development and teachers' work at this time. We start with their key insights about the changing nature of teachers' work. Next, we consider the combined impact of devolution, managerialism and standards discourses on professional development. Finally, we outline preferred principles for professional learning, based on teachers' experiences across their careers and within this cross-generational research project. We conclude with some suggestions for re-thinking professional development so that it offers rejuvenation, rather than exhaustion.

TEACHERS' WORK: THE IMPACT OF DEVOLUTION, MANAGERIALISM AND STANDARDS

Over the past decade, state governments and education departments in Australia and elsewhere have increasingly devolved a range of tasks and some aspects of decision-making and financial management to schools and districts (Blackmore, 1993, 1999; Luke, 2003; Reid and Johnson, 1993). At the same time federal and state governments have become obsessed with standards and accountability (Luke, Lingard, Green & Comber, 1999). The standards agenda manifests itself primarily through the emphasis on national benchmark testing in literacy and numeracy along with an over-riding emphasis on early literacy. This emphasis has resulted in a good deal of early literacy assessment when children begin school and frequently repeated thereafter across the early years (the first three years of school).

In addition, as reports of abuse within families escalate, mandatory reporting of suspected cases has become a significant task in many schools and districts. Schools have been hit by the effects of a litigating society as parents are increasingly constituted as clients, with high expectations that any diagnosed problems will be fixed by the school. Unfortunately and paradoxically, these changes are occurring at the same time that children with significant intellectual, physical and psychological difficulties are now back in mainstream classrooms, in accordance with new inclusion policies. We do not dispute the rightness of inclusion. Nor do we dispute the need for teachers to be vigilant about any forms of child mistreatment, or indeed the importance of early literacy achievement for all children. However, when all of this is coupled with increased documentation, prescribed training, and devolved processes being shunted back to the schools without a corresponding increase in infrastructure support, something has to give.

In our study, late career teachers, including Di, Judy and Sue, reported the multiple effects of these compounded changes in their workplaces. It is important to note that these teachers are dedicated to the quality of primary school education and committed to working with and for culturally diverse and marginalised families. These are people who see teaching as more than just a job. Yet their contemporary experiences send out significant warnings about an over-stretched institution, with over-crowded curriculum being held together by over-worked principals and over-tired (and/or inexperienced) teachers. We pick up now a recent exchange between Judy and Sue during a teleconference.[2]

Judy: … the support that used to be around kids with language and communication problems, or special ed needs, that's decreasing, and more and more emphasis is being placed on the inclusion and the classroom teacher managing it, without the support that is needed. And that's the other thing that has really struck me of late I guess, the mental health issues that seem to be identified in students that I don't remember seeing 20 years ago.

Sue: Even with my reception children, I'm expected to be picking up speech problems, dyslexia, auditory processing difficulties, autism and Aspbergers, and if I haven't picked these conditions up and expressed a suspicion regarding children I think may have one of these problems and then referred them onto a specialist to have testing done, by the time they get to year 1 or 2, their parents come back and say, "Why didn't you pick it up?" And you think, "Goodness me, here's a five-year-old child who's barely able to sit down and keep still long enough to look at you, yet, I am supposed to actually detect a whole range of problems they may have."

Judy: Yes, that sort of stuff has all come back, and the day-to-day management.

Sue: You almost become paranoid. I've got about half a dozen children in my class that I'm waiting on referrals for one thing or another. Some of these children may really be perfectly normal children, merely immature, but

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[2] It became difficult to bring the teachers together often as our funds were short. It was hard for them to be out of their schools and many lived and worked significant distances from the city. Teleconferences were an incredibly useful technique for staying connected, keeping the conversations moving forward and supporting each other.

> you just cannot let it go if you have any suspicions. Sadly, we do not let them have the time to develop and then find out.

Judy works with children with extreme behavioral and social difficulties (including violence) who have been temporarily excluded from their local primary schools, so she really understands the challenges they present in the mainstream classroom. She makes two key points that we heard reiterated by teachers across the project. Firstly, that the teachers don't get the support they need in the classroom to learn to manage these children and secondly, that in her experience there are simply more children with "mental health issues". Whether there are increased numbers of children suffering from mental health problems or whether the increase is an effect of a society obsessed by diagnosis, the fact remains that more children are suffering from such problems in ways that affect their learning at school, and schools are expected to handle these problems.

As Sue, who teaches five-year-olds, argues these demands are present as soon as children commence school. The teacher is increasingly positioned as a spotter of problems to be diagnosed, which are beyond her expertise. Yet, ironically, it can take months for an expert diagnosis to be processed and, even then, it does not mean that any support will be forthcoming. It is not surprising if teachers become cynical about the process as merely something to be undertaken in case of litigation, rather than in the interests of the child.

> Sue: Accountability is another thing as well. Our principal is regularly telling us that if you're going to discuss any issues with a parent, make sure you have it in writing, and have it signed by the parent so that it will be filed away and there can be no recourse at a later date. He said that if you have any concerns about a child at all, you must continually get the parents in and talk to them about your concerns, and make sure that you have verbalized and written down any problems that you think that child may have. It seems it's almost like a scare tactic that in a few years time they're going to come back and say …
>
> Judy: The litigation issue.

The teachers described the incredible amount of time spent on record keeping, filling in forms for referrals, meetings about the processes of performance management. The combined emphasis on accountability, self management, devolution and standards produces even higher levels of anxiety (and at times panic) in schools where children and families are struggling with such matters as poverty, illness, unemployment, breakdowns and relocation.

DEVOLUTION DRAIN

Di was so fired up after the teleconference discussion with Sue and Judy that she decided to 'talk on tape' in a more elaborated way about how issues of devolution and professional development played out in her workplace. Here we have selected and fashioned from her taped monologue a transcript poem (Richardson 1994; Kamler

2001). The words used are Di's, but they have been shaped, trimmed and clipped to preserve the rhythm of her telling and capture her increasing irritation at the downloading of what she calls 'top down stuff and the way it is draining the energy of the teacher workforce. In doing so, we are also calling attention to the way researcher accounts of teacher narratives are always a selection, always partial, always a representation.

Teacher draining and development: A transcript poem

Over the years I have seen a huge increase
in the way schools are expected
to take on systems-based
responsibilities.
More and more
we get
top
down
stuff.

The department seems to be just
pushing their responsibilities
further and further
down the line
and that guilt thing comes in.
"If I don't do it, I'm letting my school down
because there's nobody else around."
So much is being heaped on the school.
The principals
are totally overwhelmed
so are the deputies
so then it gets pushed further
down the pecking order
to the point where you're doing
systems stuff
instead of
important stuff
to improve the learning of the students.

Someone on staff has to be
the Occupational Health & Safety rep
and they do five days training during the year.
Then they come back to school
and they have to have a weekly meeting with the principal
and OK, that's given to them in school time
however there are lots of other times
when that person could be having
a cup of coffee,
doing
some professional reading
having
an in-depth conversation with a colleague
going
to the Resource Centre for new teaching ideas.
They can't do any of that

because they're bogged down
in
systems
top
down
expectations.

The Occupational Health & Safety rep
has to sign off paper work
just simply to purchase resources in the school.
I understand there have to be
safety measures
but there is so much of it these days
it just totally   drains   people.
This top down stuff is
draining
the enthusiasm
and energy level
of teachers.

Our district decided to have one
single referral form
for guidance requests, speech requests, attendance requests.
So when you want to seek any assistance
from outside agencies
we have a new form we need to fill out.
Now that was OK
but the angst it has generated is
incredible
to the point where they had to run
a training and development session
on how to fill out the form.
I went off to this training and development
and walked out of there feeling
absolutely   depressed.
What on earth
has this got to do with my everyday teaching?
What can it do
to help me
help my students?

Sure, if we have kids that we're worried about
we certainly seek guidance counsellors or speech therapists
but by the time they get around to assessing the students
it could be two years down the track.
And yet here we are
doing training and development
on how to fill out a form
that won't get any action for months
and months   and months.

Another classic example of this top down training and development
was the new negotiated education plan CD.
We were notified that training and development
would be run over two sessions.

Being the coordinator in the school
I encouraged as many of my staff as I could to go along.
We sat there in this hall.
It was stinking hot
the air conditioning wasn't working
and then the people running the show started to talk about
how to negotiate
can you believe they used that phrase?
your way around the negotiated education plan CD-ROM.
Six hours of training and development all up
and a lot of us came away feeling
What on earth
did we go there
for?

The people delivering the training and development
didn't really have an understanding
of how to work the CD
and people were asking questions
and they were saying "Yes, we found that problem too
but we don't know how to answer that."
Once we got back into the schools and started using this software
we ran into all kinds of problems
so we were on the phone to our support personnel
and they too
couldn't
answer
our questions.

It seems that the department comes up
with these great ideas,
they shunt them
out into the schools,
they give the job to inexperienced people
to teach the plebs in the classroom
and they haven't got their head around it.
The package they're delivering
is quite often faulty or full of glitches
so instead of walking away from that training and development
thinking
"Oh yes, I understand this, I know how to work this,"
you walk away feeling
even more
frustrated
than you were before you went.

That has a huge
impact
on the emotional
well-being
and
morale
of teachers.

The expectation is

the classroom teacher
needs to do this
the classroom teacher
needs to do that
and I find myself saying
"No, stop!"

Teachers are so busy
trying to get their head around the managerial side of teaching
going off to training and development
in their own time to find out more
but really
what has it got to do with the
actual   learning of the students
that they're teaching?
It might make the school run a tad better
it certainly takes the pressure off
different people
in the department
but I do
challenge and question the relevance
for the learning of the students

After all
we are there
to teach students.
We are
NOT there
to do increasingly
more
of the department's work.

Nothing seems straightforward anymore.
Every time you go to do something
that is supposedly to help you with your students
you have to go through
this obstacle course
to get to the end
and of course
by the time you've
got
to the end
you're
absolutely
pooped.

Many of the themes discussed by the other teacher researchers are repeated in this analysis. We will not pause here to unpick her account, as it speaks powerfully and succinctly of the embodied effects of devolution on dedicated teachers. Di is not a complainer; it is her lifelong commitment to teaching and her students that prompts her critique. Yet her experience of school-based professional development – with its emphasis on risk management and managerialism – is represented here as debilitating, frustrating, draining and exhausting. Judy and Sue offer a similar critique as well as a

more positive evaluation of the kind of professional development they enjoyed in the project and that they would like to see provided for other teachers.

THE PROBLEMS WITH PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

When teachers talked about their experiences of professional development they frequently constructed it in an oppositional way – contrasting the professional development they liked with that they didn't like. For Judy, a key point of difference is whether there is "an expert telling you what to do" or alternatively "enough direction to enable me to find my way…without being prescriptive".

> Judy: The thing I've found about professional development, the thing that's always got me when I've gone to training is there's always the expert telling you what to do, and there isn't the opportunity to really relate it to what you do in the classroom because it's usually a one-day session. And then often principals have this thing that you will then do it, without the support that needs to go with it. The difference with this project for me has been the support that's gone with it, and there's been enough direction to enable me to find my way through without it being prescriptive as to what I have to do. So for my mind, each of us has then adapted it to the needs of the kids we've worked with.

Judy and her peers often referred to "the expert" who asserted what to do, when and how, but without any knowledge either of teachers' working conditions or their students.

> Judy: I went to a thing on bullying, and it was this expert standing up saying, "This is the way you deal with bullying in schools, and this is what you should be doing with the kids." About an hour in I thought, "If I do this, then I don't do anything else in my classroom."… and I was sort of kicking myself because I was getting so negative, but I then began to think of all the other issues they weren't addressing. A principal who was at the conference, I found out later, took her staff aside the next night at their staff meeting, and gave them a two-hour talk on "This is what we will do." They had no say in it; they had no voice into how it would happen. They were just told that it had to be done, and I thought what they do is look at education and learning as a tiny bit, they're experts.

Judy's account shows the effects of professional development that purports to tell the truth about an educational problem and to lay out an infallible blueprint for action. Ironically, the expert on bullying effectively (if unwittingly) positions the attendees at the conference as docile obedient subjects, as does the school principal who returns to her school and lectures her staff about how they will treat bullying. There is no room for teacher input; teachers must simply do what they are told – implement other people's actions, be conduits for the supposedly right method. The experts, of course, as Judy observes, are responsible only for knowing about "a tiny bit", in this case bullying. They do not have to work through a day with the competing demands of other agendas and actual children. Sue continues this theme of the downward trajectory of even good ideas once teachers return to school.

Sue: I must say I really enjoy going to professional development and learning…that is, the sessions that are relevant to what you're teaching in the classroom, I really enjoy them. And I get inspired, but I think especially if you go out of the school to a particular course, you get excited and you get caught up with whatever the presenter is talking about, and you think, "This is great, that's great, I'll do that, I'll do that." And then you go back to school and straight away you're hit with …well, I'm hit with the 25 shoelaces that I have to tie, and … ten children that can't open their chips packet, and … a couple of children that can't remember which seats they're sitting in and things like that, and then you look for the resources. And you haven't got the books and you haven't got the money to buy that great equipment that you need to implement the program. Gradually that enthusiasm you had drains off, whereas with the research project that we did, we actually started it in the classroom, and because we started it at the classroom, the whole thing fitted with every other aspect of the classroom that you have. Because we actually tailored it and we made it fit with everything that we had in the classroom. It wasn't picking up some attractive package and then trying to super-impose it on the classroom that you have.

Judy: Well said!

Sue: I think that's what made this project incredibly beneficial and worthwhile because there weren't any of those extremes. I mean obviously there were the times we were out of the classroom at the university, but we were still designing a project for the children in our class.

In Sue's account, her enthusiasm for attending relevant professional development outside of the school context is challenged on her return to school, where the immediate demands of teaching twenty-five five-year-olds and a lack of the ideal resources "drain" that enthusiasm. By contrast, she outlines key features of the professional development provided by the project: starting in their classrooms, tailoring input to their own contexts and designing a project for their children.

These themes were clearly very important to Sue, as she reiterated them strongly in the reflective interview on a separate occasion. We note strong ownership and agency in her discourse as she insists "we" did this or "we" did that. Unlike the voiceless teachers reported by Judy above, teachers are represented here as active decision-makers and doers.

Sue: Our research is not just something we've grabbed and run with. We've developed our programs and thought them through and planned them and worked out own questions…. I think it has made a lot more lasting change than the in-service that you usually get because so often you hear people afterwards saying: "I love doing that and doing this", but then a month later they're back to doing what they did before because of other issues that interfere. We've had the time with our research to work through the issues, work through the questions, work through what we're actually trying to achieve, and we have been looking at particular children and so on. Our redesign has become a whole thing in itself and the change has actually been built into what you're doing, rather than just happening on the spur of the moment as our projects have developed and grown.

The research design aspects of this professional development experience were particularly salient for Sue. As she puts it, the teachers themselves (1) developed it; (2) worked out the questions; (3) had the time to think it through; (4) looked at particular children; (5) designed and carried out coherent change.

Importantly, as Sue points out, the research process allowed the teacher-designed pedagogical projects to develop and grow. Therefore, unlike typical in-service programs, the projects produced lasting change, which is likely to be sustainable. Judy confirms this strongly, before she, Sue and Di go on to describe key features of the project's evolving teacher-research community.

Judy: … So rather than imposing it on us, I felt I had the power to go with it where I wanted to.

Sue: I agree with that, too. I felt that it became a dynamic thing, it was growing, it was spinning off into a lot of other areas, and because it was our project we were quite free to be able to capture any of that, it wasn't some program that someone was telling us, "This is how you do it, and you do this one day and something else the next day." We could tailor what we were doing, and as the project continued and did grow, I was able to expand it into other areas of my literacy program.

Judy: And make mistakes and make it fit with what we needed to do.

Sue: That's exactly it, trying things and, "No, that didn't work, so try something else."

Di: Just following on from that, too, it just occurred to me then that while we were sitting around debriefing and telling, sharing with each other what we were doing with our design, or in our classrooms, whatever, the other spin-offs as well as getting the feedback and feeling good about what you were doing, was the ideas that were generated between each group, and the learning that took place… finding out what really happens in the high school, and what happens in a behavioral unit and a special class. There were heaps of things that I could identify with, and there were heaps of things that I learnt that were new. It wasn't anything hugely new; it was just maybe looking at it from a different point of view, and I found that really reassuring because to me it was, I guess, backing up what you said, Judy, a pat on the back because all those previous years of teaching haven't been useless. We have forgotten so many of the activities and the methodologies that we used to do, that are still just as good and effective, but because our curriculum is so crowded, and we have so much top-down stuff, they get pushed onto the back burner.

The teachers' enthusiasm for their research and participation in the wider network is strong. Teacher research, as they experienced it, appears to be generative rather than draining. We hear about teachers' openness to learning about, and from, each other's working conditions and challenges. We hear about the value of feedback, debriefs, professional conversations (a key theme which is discussed further in Boyer & Maney, this issue). Rather than the drain and exhaustion highlighted earlier in Di's transcript poem, keywords used here are "power", "dynamic", "growing", "free", "debriefing", "generating", "reassuring". Given that this group of people have been teaching for thirty years or more, these ways of speaking are encouraging and indicate, we would argue, a sense of rejuvenation.

CONCLUSION

As we wrote this paper, Di reported the cancellation of a professional association workshop in a nearby regional town and Barbara Comber read that the South Australian English Teachers Association had not received one applicant for two, all-expenses-paid travel scholarships to the recent national conference in Sydney. As numerous educators have argued, if we don't do something now about the exhaustion, cynicism and alienation experienced by many teachers – early and late career – we are in deep trouble as a profession (Darling-Hammond, 2003; Nieto, 2003).

The narrative accounts presented in this article foreground important teacher perspectives about how to reclaim the professional development agenda. Di, Judy and Sue highlight a number of key principles that make professional development worthwhile and sustainable, based on their experiences across their careers and within this project. These include a lack of hierarchy in mentoring relationships; an emphasis on knowledge production rather than knowledge transmission; the importance of working within the teachers' specific local contexts in order to produce change.

This is not to deny the importance of teachers grappling with theoretical work, related research and policy. However, what was important to teachers in the cross-generational research project was having agency to read these critically and imaginatively. When new theoretical resources were made available, teachers did not have to superimpose these on their own practice. They remade what was helpful and useful to them in their own contexts. They redesigned pedagogies in a theorised way; they fused their experiential knowledge with contemporary wisdom in new ways that benefited all students. Their time commitment to the three-year research project was demanding, but it enlivened teachers, rather than sapping their energy.

Long term protagonists of the teacher research movement, Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999), point out that despite the compelling nature of teacher research, the standards movement is a major threat to its sustainability.

> …What these developments share in common is a set of underlying assumptions about school change that de-emphasizes differences in local contexts, de-emphasizes the construction of local knowledge in and by school communities, and de-emphasizes the role of the teacher as decision-maker and change agent. These ideas have been at the heart of many initiatives related to the teacher research movement. Thus, the direction of the movement in the years to come is uncertain (p. 22).

Given the determination of governments to establish professional standards for teaching, it is imperative that teachers contribute to the parameters of such policies, lest a "one size fits all" approach determines what counts as teaching, what it means to be a teacher (Sachs, 2003, p. 185) and what constitutes professional development. Late career teachers have a significant amount to offer based on their lengthy careers about what really supports teachers to learn and make sustainable changes. We are currently developing models of research-based reciprocal mentoring that can be extended to larger populations of teachers across generations and schooling sectors and that foster more enriching teacher induction and renewal.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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